

<AMOS: BACK TO 'THE START'>

This week, we focus on the issue of justice. God has given us many gifts. As a result, we should be willing to freely share with others. Amos listed a number of different types of injustice: cheating people in the marketplace, unreasonable debt security, enslavement, sexual abuse, bribery and dishonesty in the courts. In each case, there was an abuse of power and the people most impacted were the poor and the needy. Power, privilege and greed are also a part of our world. How then should we respond to injustice?

GETTING STARTED: In Scripture, righteousness (ie doing the right thing) and justice (or acting justly) are two concepts that are put together, and are specified as things God requires of us.

“I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” (Gen 18:19)

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and **what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*** (Micah 6:8)

- ? Can you give an example of a time when you have been treated unjustly? How did you feel? How did you respond?

Let's start with God's grace ...

In Amos 2, the indictment against the kingdom of Israel started with a recital of their history. God reminded them that he took the initiative and was the one who rescued and saved them. 800 years later, the apostle John wrote, that our love for each other is a natural response because God first loved us and saved us.

“I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? says the LORD.” (Amos 2:10-11)

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” (1 John 4:7-9)

- ? In what way, does being a recipient of God's grace, impose an obligation on us to act in a loving way towards other human beings? Is it an obligation? Or is it a choice? What is the difference?
- ? If we claim to love God, but we are not acting rightly and justly towards others, what does that say about our relationship with God?

Commercial Injustice / Justice in the Marketplace

READ: AMOS 8:4-6

Listen to this, you who rob the poor and trample down the needy! You can't wait for the Sabbath day to be over and the religious festivals to end so you can get back to cheating the helpless. You measure out grain with dishonest measures and cheat the buyer with dishonest scales. And you mix the grain you sell with chaff swept from the floor. Then you enslave poor people for one piece of silver or a pair of sandals.

Many of us are aware of basic laws that are intended to protect consumers. If a product is faulty or it doesn't do what we were told it should do – we are able to return the product to the shop or vender. These sorts of laws didn't exist in Amos' day. These verses refer to injustices that occur in the market place:

- Shop keepers manipulating their scales so that people didn't get the full weight and quantity of goods that they are paying for;
- Buyers discovering that the grain they had bought, was mixed with 'chaff' or rubbish which couldn't be eaten, but had added to the weight.

In both cases, the seller got more money for his goods and the buyer was cheated. The seller used their power to engage in unconscionable conduct, exploiting the special disadvantage of another.¹

- ? Amos highlighted the impact of these tactics on “the poor”, “the needy” and “the helpless”. Why did their situation make them more vulnerable to commercial exploitation?
- ? What role do we have, in advocating for the vulnerable in our society and ensuring they have access to services and provisions that meet their needs?

¹ <https://rlc.org.au/sites/default/files/attachments/Redfern%20Legal%20Centre%20-%20Factsheet%2019%20-%20Unconscionable%20conduct.pdf>

Economic Oppression, Slavery and Sexual Abuse

READ: AMOS 2:6-8, 3:10, 4:1, 8:6

- ? As you read the following passages, what actions demonstrate an abuse of power? And what actions demonstrate an attitude of contempt towards the poor? How do these actions and attitudes with those of God, when the people were oppressed, powerless and enslaved in Egypt?

This is what the LORD says: "The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They sell honourable people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, corrupting my holy name. At their religious festivals, they lounge in clothing their debtors put up as security. In the house of their gods, they drink wine bought with unjust fines. (Amos 2:6-8)

"My people have forgotten how to do right," says the LORD. "Their fortresses are filled with wealth taken by theft and violence. (Amos 3:10)

Listen to me, you fat cows living in Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy, and who are always calling to your husbands, "Bring us another drink!" (Amos 4:1)

Then you enslave poor people for one piece of silver or a pair of sandals. (Amos 8:6)

The poor would literally have to pledge the clothes or sandals that they were wearing as security for their debts. If people didn't repay, even small debts, they were forced to become slaves. Ex 22:25-27 specified special rules for lending to the poor. If they'd given their cloak as security, it had to be returned by sunset to they didn't freeze. In Lev 25:35-46, Israelites were not to enslave other Israelites who were destitute.

- ? How can power and prosperity predispose us to see others as 'dirt', as commodities to be bought and sold and to take away their basic human rights (including education and healthcare)? In what ways is this happening in our world today?

In Amos 2:7b, Hubbard sees that "fathers, taking advantage of filial obedience and the inability of young women to stand up for their rights, asserted patriarchal authority to have intercourse with their daughters-in-law, despite the laws of Israel which clearly forbade such confusion of sexual relations."²

- ? In what ways is sexual abuse a form of injustice? What factors make some groups of people more vulnerable to abuse than others? What things need to be put in place to mitigate that risk?

Legal Injustice

READ: AMOS 5:7,10-15

You twist justice, making it a bitter pill for the oppressed. You treat the righteous like dirt.

How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent. Therefore, though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them. Though you plant lush vineyards, you will never drink wine from them. For I know the vast number of your sins and the depth of your rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. So those who are smart keep their mouths shut, for it is an evil time. Do what is good and run from evil so that you may live! Then the LORD God of Heaven's Armies will be your helper, just as you have claimed. Hate evil and love what is good; turn your courts into true halls of justice. Perhaps even yet the LORD God of Heaven's Armies will have mercy on the remnant of his people.

- ? What factors does Amos list that impacted legal justice in his day?
- ? What advice is given to those who have been victims of injustice? Who must we turn to, to fight our battles, especially when justice is not upheld in the courtroom?

REFLECT, SHARE & PRAY

READ: PSALM 15

- ? We often think of 'worship' as being praise and thanksgiving. Why does God require us to live out justice and righteousness in the context of our relationships, in order for our worship to be acceptable to Him? What things in this passage, particularly challenge you and the way you act?

Who may worship in your sanctuary, LORD? Who may enter your presence on your holy hill? Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts. Those who refuse to gossip or harm their neighbours or speak evil of their friends. Those who despise flagrant sinners, and honour the faithful followers of the LORD, and keep their promises even when it hurts. Those who lend money without charging interest, and who cannot be bribed to lie about the innocent. Such people will stand firm forever.

² Hubbard, D. A. (1989). *Joel and Amos: an Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 25). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p150.